Naturalism and The Desire for Esteem

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In this article, I consider the prospects for 'Naturalism', the view that our nature as social animals precludes us from being able to cultivate a state of indifference to social esteem. Despite its philosophical interest and intuitive appeal, Naturalism has received little in the way of detailed philosophical elaboration. Drawing on work by Bernard Williams, I develop a version of Naturalism which prioritises the idea that human beings characteristically have a natural commitment to a life lived in community with others, and that it is this commitment which precludes us from being able to intentionally cultivate indifference to social esteem.

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1. Introduction

In the *Philosophical Dictionary,* Voltaire observes that just as no-one needs to take up the pen to prove to others that they have a face, so it would be gratuitous to try and persuade people that they love themselves. This is, he thinks, something that we are intimately, uncomfortably, acquainted with.

Much the same might be said of that other aspect of *amour-propre*, the desire for social esteem. We want to be liked, to be admired, and to have a good reputation, and we are generally averse to being disliked, disdained, and to being held in ill-fame. And, as with *amour-propre* in general, so for our desire for esteem in particular: it would be pointless to try and prove that we want social esteem, this being something that we have first-hand acquaintance with in our struggles with pride, shame, and humiliation. We care so deeply about our standing in the eyes of others, Rousseau says, that we are often more pained by attacks to our public image than we are by attacks to our body (1755: 166). And in a footnote in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx notes, quoting the Quaker educational theorist John Bellers, that many would sooner die of starvation than suffer the shame of being seen to beg (1867: 609, n. 12).

Struggles of this sort lead naturally to philosophical reflection. We might wonder: Do we care about esteem too much? Too little? Should we seek the esteem of the world at large, or only the esteem of a select few? And finally, should we care about esteem and disesteem at all?

One strand in the philosophical tradition answers the last of these questions negatively. According to a tradition stretching from Diogenes of Sinope, through Epictetus, Montaigne and Pascal to the present day, the highest form of ethical self-cultivation is one which involves a state of indifference to social esteem.[1] The virtuous agent, on this conception, will neither desire nor take pleasure in esteem, except, perhaps, for merely instrumental reasons. I will call the state recommended by this tradition *Indifference*.

My interest in this paper lies not with the considerations that might be offered in favour of Indifference. To be in the business of arguing for or against this proposal, after all, is to assume that it is a genuine option for us. Instead, I will consider whether this assumption is correct. More specifically, I will

[1] See, for instance, Diogenes Laërtius 2018: Book 6; Cicero 2001: III.57; Epictetus 1928: §1, §5; Montaigne, 1595: 'On Glory' and 'On Solitude'; Pascal 1670: *passim*; Lovejoy 1961: 96–98; and, for a contemporary espousal, Schueler 1997.

consider the prospects for a view I will call *Naturalism*. Naturalism consists of two theses.

It consists, first, of the thesis that we are naturally incapable of cultivating Indifference. We can call this *The Incapacity Thesis.* This claim alone, however, does not entail any particular endorsement or affirmation of this incapacity. It is compatible, for example, with regarding our incapacity to cultivate Indifference as an unfortunate limitation or flaw in human nature. Naturalism, as I seek to develop it, denies this. That is, it involves a specific kind of endorsement of our incapacity to cultivate indifference. This incapacity, the naturalist suggests, is not something to be deplored or lamented; it is something to be embraced. And, as such, we should not think of our highest ethical ideal as involving a state of Indifference, as some of the authors mentioned above seem to. We can call this *The Reflective Endorsement Thesis.*[2]

Naturalism is an intuitive and philosophically interesting idea. If my impressions are anything to go by, it is also one which enjoys widespread implicit acceptance. But it is an idea which has unfortunately received little in the way of detailed elaboration or defence. My aim here is to remedy this neglect.

After some stage-setting in §2, I begin with a consideration of the idea that human beings have a 'hardwired' desire for esteem (§3). I argue that this alone is not sufficient to constitute a vindication of The Incapacity Thesis and The Reflective Endorsement Thesis, and that appealing to the simple but extreme idea that it is impossible for human beings to achieve Indifference will not help. In §4, I outline an alternative way of understanding Naturalism which is based on the idea that human beings have evolved a natural normative commitment to a life lived in community with others. Drawing on work by Bernard Williams

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[2] I call this view *Naturalism* because it emphasises facts about the natural life-cycle of human beings. It is worth emphasising, however, that this does not signal commitment to a more general form of meta-ethical naturalism, such as the versions of Aristotelian Naturalism espoused by Phillipa Foot (2001) and Michael Thompson (2007). Rather, I hope Naturalism (in my sense) will be attractive to philosophers of a variety of meta-ethical persuasions.

on the notion of a 'moral incapacity', I argue that this commitment renders us incapable of the *intentional* cultivation of Indifference.

2. 'Indifference' and 'The Desire for Esteem'

In this section I will begin by offering a more detailed characterisation of our desire for esteem and, on this basis, I will distinguish several ways in which the putative ideal of Indifference might be understood.

2.1 The Desire for Esteem

Esteem, as I will be using it, is a general term which groups together several different ways in which someone might be positively appraised by others. Esteem, in this sense, can be understood as a 'thin' concept with 'thick' counterparts such as being liked, admiration, and good reputation.[3]

To like someone is to take them to be likeable, where this involves taking them to have some positive trait which renders social interaction with them desirable on its own account. Such qualities include those of being funny, kind, affable, caring, or exciting. Crucially, liking someone involves a disposition to be drawn to them and, all else being equal, to seek their company for its own sake (Lewis 2022: 4).

To admire someone, by contrast, is to take them to be admirable, where this consists not merely in the possession of some positive trait, but in the possession of a trait which is, in a specific way, exceptional or remarkable. Adam Smith for instance characterises admiration as a form of 'approbation' that is 'heightened by wonder and surprise' (1759: p. 24). Since not all admirable traits need necessarily render the admired person's company desirable for its own sake, being admired need not involve a disposition, all else

[3] The parallel here is with Williams's (1985) discussion of thick ethical concepts.

being equal, for the admirer to seek out and enjoy the admired person's company.[4] Admiration, however, has characteristic dispositions of its own. Zagzebski (2015), for instance, has emphasised the way in which admiration involves a disposition, all else being equal, to emulate the admired person. And, in dialogue with this proposal, Archer (2019) suggests that admiration involves a more general disposition to promote the value which is implicated in one's state of admiration.

Good reputation is somewhat more nebulous. One can have a good reputation in a group of people by being generally liked or admired by members of the group in question. This group might have clear membership conditions (the members of a social club), but it need not (the art world). In either case, good reputation seems to be conceptually connected with testimony. When someone has a good reputation, others are disposed to think and speak well of them, and to object to others who speak badly of them. As such, the person in question is liable to be esteemed by others in the relevant group on the basis of general hearsay of fellow group members.[5]

Each of these different forms of esteem might be desired on either instrumental or non-instrumental grounds.

To desire esteem instrumentally, in the sense that I have in mind, is to desire esteem for the sake of some further, independent good. For example, we might want to be liked, admired or to have a good reputation because these forms of social esteem enable us to secure profitable employment, promotion, wealth, or protection; and we are averse to being disliked, disdained, and to having a bad reputation because these things increase the likelihood that we will suffer various forms of injury.

To want to be the object of esteem on instrumental grounds is compatible with the thought that one is indifferent to it on its own account. But most of us

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[4] This is implicit, for example, in La Rochefoucald's maxim: 'we always like those who admire us, and we do not always like those whom we admire' (1678: §294).

[5] Compare Tanesini (2021: 91) on the relationship between reputation and testimony. Tanesini insists, where I do not, that in order for one to have a good reputation, some others must base their attitude of one at least in part on testimony.

are not indifferent in this way. We care deeply about the way we figure in the minds of others: we have a non-instrumental desire for esteem, and to stand in relationships with others which are essentially esteem-involving.

2.2 Varieties of 'Indifference'

We are now in a position to distinguish different versions of Indifference.

The most extreme espousal of Indifference has it that the virtuous agent will be indifferent to esteem on both instrumental and non-instrumental grounds. It is possible that the stoics held something like this view, holding, as they did, that everything other than virtue and vice is a mere indifferent.[6]

In this paper I will focus on a more moderate espousal of Indifference according to which we ought to aspire to an attitude of indifference to social esteem on its own account, but which allows that it might nevertheless be desired on instrumental grounds. Montaigne, for example, writes that 'all the glory in the world' — which he defines as 'the world's approbation of…our actions' — is 'not such that a man of discretion should merely stretch out a finger to acquire it'. In making this point, however, he is careful to add the following clarification: 'I mean, to acquire it for its own sake; for it does bring in its train several advantages which can make it desirable' (1595: 703–4).

This approach might recommend indifference to social esteem in general, or in a way that is specific to a particular kind of social esteem. It might be suggested that we cannot or should not be indifferent to whether we are liked by others, but insisted that we ought to be indifferent to whether or not we are admired or have a good reputation. Montaigne, for example, is most straightforwardly read as recommending indifference to admiration and reputation, whereas the antagonistic behaviour of Diogenes of Sinope suggests

[6] This might be complicated by the puzzling doctrine of 'preferred indifferents' advocated by some stoics. See Sellars 2006 and Klein 2015 for discussion.

a more general form of Indifference to esteem in all of its forms.[7] It will be my aim in this paper to develop a version of Naturalism which makes a case for the thought that none of these forms of Indifference constitute genuine options or ideals for us.

Before moving on it is worth emphasising that one might espouse Indifference as an ethical ideal whilst allowing that the fact human beings desire esteem has instrumental benefits. For example, the proponent of Indifference might allow that the desire for esteem plays an important role in education, moral development and the regulation of behaviour. It is through desiring esteem, it is sometimes said, that we come to learn how to act virtuously, and the fact that people generally desire esteem serves to ensure that we generally act in ways which conform with, or at the very least do not flagrantly violate, the norms of morality.[8] Finally, they might even allow that the desire for esteem has played an important role in human evolution, by facilitating co-operative activity, for example, and by playing an important role in cultural learning.[9]

3. The Appeal to Impossibility

3.1 A Hardwired Desire?

Naturalism attributes an incapacity to cultivate Indifference to human beings.[10] How should this incapacity be understood?

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[7] Things Montaigne says elsewhere suggest a view closer to that of Diogenes: 'let us', he writes, 'make our happiness depend on ourselves; let us loose ourselves from the bonds which tie us to others; let us gain power over ourselves to live really and truly alone' (1595: 269).

[8] For the role of the desire for esteem in moral education, see Aristotle 1984: *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1128b10–20, and for its role in the regulation of social behaviour see Williams 2006: 41–42.

[9] See, for instance, Tomasello 2018 and Henrich & Gil-White 2001.

[10] This is a generic claim and, as such, is compatible with exceptions. That there are such people (people, that is, that are completely indifferent to social esteem) should not be ruled out in advance, but nor should their existence be assumed as an indisputable fact.

In their book *The Economy of Esteem*, Brennan & Pettit (2004) suggest that human beings have evolved a hardwired desire for esteem which constitutes 'a modular motivational force that operates independently of information about the effects of its satisfaction'. They write:

> Just as modularisation ensures that we see the stick in water as bent, so that it looks bent even when we know it is straight, so modularisation might ensure that we desire the esteem of others, so that such esteem will look attractive even in circumstances where it serves no other desires and where we know that that is so. (Brennan and Pettit 2004: 30)[11]

It is plausible that we have evolved a hardwired desire of this form. As Michael Tomasello (2018) has emphasised, human life is characterised by a deep and thoroughgoing pattern of co-operative activity. We depend for our survival on the profits of co-operation, and in order to receive our share of these profits, we must play our part. In order to do this, however, we must be selected as co-operative partners, and this generally requires that we are seen by others as desirable collaborators. For this reason, our desire for esteem—or, in Tomasello's terms, positive 'social evaluation'—is adaptive insofar as it leads us to engage in 'impression-management', the activity of acting in ways that will make others think well of us, and thus of maximising the chances that we are selected and valued as co-operative partners. Those that are liked, admired and have a good reputation, after all, are more likely to be selected as collaborators than those who are not.[12]

We need to go further than this if we wish to defend a version of Naturalism, however, because the mere idea that human beings have evolved a hardwired

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[11] Although they suggest that this claim is plausible, they do not commit to it, and nor do they need to for the purposes of their argument in that book.

[12] See Tomasello 2018: 9 and ch. 8. Henrich & Gil-White (2001) argue that social prestige (which is closely related to social esteem) is adaptive insofar as it plays a role in the maintenance of high-fidelity cultural transmission and social learning.

desire for esteem is not sufficient to vindicate The Incapacity Thesis and The Reflective Endorsement Thesis.

The mere appeal to a hardwired desire for esteem does not entail The Incapacity Thesis. It entails, at most, that we have an innate tendency to develop a desire for esteem under suitable conditions. This might give us a reason to expect it to be extremely difficult for us to attain a state of Indifference, but it would not entail that we are incapable of doing so.[13]

Nor does it vindicate The Reflective Endorsement Thesis. The fact we have an ingrained tendency to find the cultivation of Indifference extremely difficult might have some force against the claim that we are obliged to be indifferent—if we assume, controversially, that our ethical obligations should not be this demanding—but it has little force against the claim that the highest form of ethical self-cultivation should be characterised with reference to a state of Indifference. Indeed, it is a part of the very idea of an ideal that it is a state that is difficult to attainl otherwise we would not have to aspire to it.[14]

3.2 Is Indifference Impossible?

A more ambitious strategy would be to appeal to the thought that our hardwired desire for esteem renders it impossible for us to achieve a state of Indifference. For example, the following argument might be offered:

(1) It is impossible for us to achieve a state of Indifference
(2) If it is impossible for us to achieve a state of Indifference, then it is not the case that we ought to achieve a state of Indifference.
(3) Therefore, it is not the case that we ought to achieve a state of Indifference.

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[13] Even if this did entail that we are incapable of extirpating our hard-wired desire for esteem (i.e., The Incapacity Thesis) it would not entail that we are incapable of resisting the influence that this desire has on our thought and action, just as we learn to resist our tendency to see a stick underwater as bent. Thanks to a reviewer for this suggestion.

[14] A related point is made by De Sousa (1980: 171)

This strategy resembles Strawson's characterisation of Hume's naturalist response to skepticism in the following passage:

> According to Hume the naturalist, skeptical doubts are not to be met by argument…They are to be neglected because they are *idle*; powerless against the force of our nature, of our naturally implanted disposition to belief. (Strawson 1984: 13)[15]

Similarly, this strategy has it that since it is impossible for us to successfully achieve a state of Indifference, we are not in a position to take seriously any considerations offered in favour of Indifference. Such considerations are idle, powerless against the force of our naturally implanted, inescapable desire for esteem.

This ambitious strategy would constitute a vindication of The Incapacity Thesis if we had good reason to accept premise (1): the idea that it is impossible for human beings to achieve a state of Indifference. Unfortunately, however, we have no good reason to believe this. We have no evidence that this is actually impossible nor is it clear what kind of evidence could be offered in favour of this hypothesis, as opposed to the hypothesis that it is extremely difficult for us to cultivate Indifference. There are few in principle limits on what human beings are capable of: we have travelled to the moon and brought our planet to the brink of destruction, so who is to say that we could not achieve a state of indifference to esteem, whether through pharmacology, mind-altering surgery, or some form of spiritual training?

And even if it could be shown that this is impossible, this would not constitute a vindication of The Reflective Endorsement Thesis. Even if it were true that it is impossible for us to achieve a state of Indifference, this would not entail that it is impossible for us to approximate Indifference to some extent.

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[15] On the same page, Strawson writes of 'an inescapable natural disposition to belief'.

Nor would it entail that this incapacity is something to be affirmed, rather than something to be regarded as an unfortunate limitation in human nature. Thus, these points might be conceded by someone like Pascal. Someone, that is, who is prepared to allow both that Indifference is an ideal to which we ought to aspire and also that it is an ideal that it is impossible for us to fully achieve. So much the worse, such a philosopher might think, for human nature.[16]

These points present an explanatory challenge for Naturalism. How should the idea that we are naturally incapable of Indifference be understood, if it is (a) not to depend on the claim that it is outright impossible for human beings to cultivate Indifference, and (b) if it is to constitute a vindication of The Reflective Endorsement Thesis? In the following section, I outline one way of responding to these questions.

4. The Appeal to Normative Incapacities

According to the version of Naturalism which I will now present, the two naturalist theses are to be derived not from some fact about what is outright impossible for human beings, but rather from a natural normative commitment which human beings characteristically, if not universally, share.

I will begin by drawing together some ideas expressed in the work of Bernard Williams which provide the resources needed to advance the claim that some of our normative commitments are so fundamental to our lives as to foreclose the possibility of certain ways of living (§4.1). Then, in §§4.2–4.5, I will draw upon these ideas to motivate versions of Naturalism which correspond to the different forms of social esteem described in §2.1.

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[16] Note that this position is compatible with a kind of reflective endorsement, but one which falls short of The Reflective Endorsement Thesis. It is open for someone like Pascal or Mandeville, for example, to acknowledge that it is a good thing that human beings in general desire esteem—given our imperfection—whilst insisting that the desire for esteem itself is a defect and that the highest form of ethical self-cultivation is one which involves Indifference.

4.1 Normative Incapacities

In a number of places Bernard Williams suggests that there is a sub-class of incapacities which are grounded in an agent's fundamental normative commitments, and therefore constitute an expression of their character, identity, and evaluative perspective.[17] We can call these incapacities *normative incapacities*.

His idea, I take it, is that some projects and commitments can be so fundamental to an agent's capacity to find both the reason and the motivation to go on living, that they can come to determine what emerges as genuine considerations for that agent, and therefore to determine what kind of actions they are capable or incapable of intentionally performing. The notion of a normative incapacity is best illustrated with reference to two of Williams's own memorable examples: those of Luther (Williams 1993a) and Ajax (Williams 1993b).

When Luther was brought before the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at the Diet of Worms to renounce his theological doctrines he is famously said to have proclaimed: 'my conscience is captive to the word of God…here I stand, I can do no other'.

If this story is apocryphal, as it perhaps is, its fame is no doubt due to the fact it aptly characterises an important aspect of human ethical experience. This aspect of ethical experience might be characterised as follows. When Luther says that his conscience is *captive* to the word of God, our attention is drawn to the way he is not a characterless surveyor of the options that might be conceivably open to any agent in his circumstances. Rather, he confronts his situation from a particular perspective, already endowed with a fundamental commitment 'around which', as Williams (1973: 116) puts it, 'he has built his life', and therefore from a standpoint from which certain conceivable options

[17] See, for instance, Williams 1981b, 1993a, and 1993b.

are already foreclosed. In this case, the project in question is, as he might have put it, the project of living a life in humble obedience to the word of God.

This commitment is fundamental to his life in the sense that it provides the framework within which it has meaning and serves as the source of 'the motive force which propels him into the future, and gives him a reason for living' (Williams 1981a: 13). Insofar as Luther's capacity to find reason and the motivation to go on is conditioned on this project, certain courses of action which are incompatible with that commitment are off the table. This normative commitment is too deep, for example, for the renunciation of the word of God to be on the table for him. Or for it to be on the table for him to cultivate a state of mind which would enable him to make this renunciation. He *cannot but* stand by the word of God. There is, he says, nothing else left for him to do.

This is experienced with a kind of necessity which Williams explores in detail in his treatment of Sophocles's *Ajax* in *Shame and Necessity*. Ajax, after going berserk and slaughtering a herd of sheep, taking them for his comrades, resolves to retain what little honour is left to him by committing suicide. As he does so, he says 'now I am going where my way *must* go'. From his point of view, he *must* commit suicide.

This experience of necessity is grounded in Ajax's fundamental normative commitments. What plays the role of the Christian life for Luther is, for Ajax, the life of the heroic warrior. Ajax is identified with the standards of excellence represented by the Ancient Greek honour code. And, as such, he therefore believes that 'the noble man should either live finely or die finely'.[18] This constitutes the framework within which Ajax can meaningfully live and act, and which conditions his interest in being around in the world at all.[19]

In each of these examples an agent avows an incapacity. But in each case we are not dealing with an incapacity that the agent discovers through empirical investigation. Rather, each is in a position to appreciate and avow the relevant

[18] See Williams 1993b: 101.

[19] Compare Williams 1973b on immortality and Williams 1981a on Parfit.

incapacity through self-conscious reflection on considerations that are open to their normative perspective. Moreover, insofar as these incapacities emerge from the agent's fundamental normative commitments, they are incapacities with which the agent will be identified. These incapacities will therefore be reflectively endorsed by the agent. Luther would not want to become the kind of person who could renounce the word of God, nor would Ajax want to become the kind of person who could look his father in the eye after having done the things that he has done.

A normative incapacity to ϕ is, Williams (1993a) suggests, a genuine incapacity to ϕ. That one possesses such an incapacity does not entail that it is impossible for one to ϕ, but it does entail that it is impossible for one to ϕ intentionally. Thus, although Luther, as he was, could not intentionally renounce the word of God, it is possible that he could have come, through a slow process of corruption or a personality-altering injury, to have a character which would be capable of this renunciation. The crucial point, though, is that for as long as he has this moral incapacity, he will be incapable of *intentionally* subjecting himself to this kind of transformative process; assuming, of course, that he recognises that this process would have that result.

A full development of Williams's account of normative incapacities would take us well beyond the topic of this paper. What matters for present purposes is that if this account is defensible, then a way forward is suggested for the Naturalist.

4.2 The Commitment to a Life in Community With Others

In this section, I will begin to build the case for my preferred version of Naturalism by arguing that human beings have a natural commitment to live a life in community with others. With this in place, I will seek to motivate the thought that this commitment precludes us from being able to intentionally

cultivate a state of Indifference with respect to whether we are liked, admired, and have a good reputation.

When Aristotle said in the *Politics* that we need to live in communities because we are not self-sufficient (1984c: 1253^{a} 25–30), he did not simply mean that we must live and act together in co-operative enterprises if we are to secure those resources that are necessary for our individual survival. He also meant that *the very life that we seek to lead* is a life among others: a life which would be, in an important sense, incomplete if lived in solitude. Few, if anyone, Aristotle thinks, would choose to live a life deprived of the hope of community, even if they had all of the other goods in their secure possession (1984: *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155^{a} 5–10).

Aristotle's language in this passage is reminiscent of Williams's discussion of our fundamental commitments. This invites the thought that human beings characteristically have a fundamental commitment to a life in community with others, and that this commitment is deeper, and more pervasive, than the socially and historically determinate outlook exemplified by Luther. More specifically, it is plausible that this is a natural human commitment: a normative commitment, that is, that human beings characteristically come to have in the natural course of human life.[20] Suppose that we have such a natural commitment, how should it be understood?

Providing a complete answer to this question would take us well beyond the aims of the present paper. But I think enough can be said in elaboration of this commitment to formulate an attractive version of Naturalism. We can begin by noting that the notion of 'community' at play here is not simply one of living in proximity with others with whom we share a language, values and practices (Mason 2004). It also requires reference to a kind of active communicative interaction.

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[20] This might occur because we have an evolved tendency to acquire this commitment, or through individual or social learning.

In early infancy, we play peekaboo and engage in episodes of joint attention with our carers; as we mature, we have conversations, share jokes, sing, dance and share intimacy through mutual touch. Our interest in communication , as these examples illustrate, goes well beyond our interest in exchanging information and co-ordinating activity. What these diverse forms of communicative interaction have in common, I think, is that they are ways of *connecting* with others. As the social psychologists Baumeister and Leary (1995) write, 'a need to belong is a fundamental motivation' (p. 498) and this involves, among other things, a need 'for regular social contact with those to whom one feels connected' (p. 501). The kind of life among others we seek to live, then, is plausibly understood as a life which affords and involves episodes of interpersonal connection with others.

When we employ the metaphor of connection in these dialectical contexts we are seeking to describe a kind of harmonious emotional relation: one in which two people are in contact ('in touch') with each other, and in which they are emotionally attuned in a way that is both pleasant and harmonious. For two people to be in contact in this way, each person must be to some extent *open* and *receptive* to the other. This point is well expressed by Ilham Dilman, who writes:

> The other person must be there to me, his responses through which I come in contact with him must be authentic, come from him—he must be in them. I on my part must meet them, not flinch from them or draw back, nor must I pretend that they are something other than what they are… I must not project my phantasies on him or treat him as a mere instrument. (Dilman 1987: 135)

When two people connect, each allows their emotional comportment to the other to be to some extent revealed to the other. But, if each is really to be in touch with the other, the other's emotional comportment must not merely be there for the viewing; it must also be recognised and attended to. And with this

openness and receptivity comes an interdependence between each individual's emotional state. Each individual's emotional comportment to the other to some extent determines, and is to some extent determined by, the other's emotional comportment to them.

The relation of connection as I have characterised it here can take relatively deep or superficial forms depending on a variety of factors, such as the interlocutors' relationship, the extent of their knowledge of one another, and the quality of their expressions or disclosures. Interactions at the superficial end of the spectrum may include instances of genuine but superficial connection between strangers on a long train journey, whereas deeper forms of connection may be shared between long term intimates.[21]

4.3 The Desire to be Liked

If our fundamental commitment to a life lived in community with others precludes indifference to whether we are afforded experiences of interpersonal connection, then it will also preclude the possibility of intentionally cultivating an attitude of indifference to whether we're liked by others. Or so I will now argue.

Connection, recall, is an emotionally harmonious relation in which each individual allows their emotional comportment to the other to be open to the other's view. But consider a case in which someone dislikes or is indifferent to you. If your interlocutor expresses their dislike of you in an interaction with you, and you are suitably receptive to this, then a disharmonious relation will ensue. This kind of interaction will not be conducive to mutual-openness. Rather, it will encourage you to erect self-protective barriers between yourself and the other.

On the other hand, if they suppress their dislike of you and put on a friendly face, although it might appear to you as if you are engaging in an episode of

[21] See Laing 2024 for more detailed elaboration of the concept of 'interpersonal connection'.

connection with them, this will at best constitute a case of merely apparent connection. The reason for this is that they will not be revealing their emotional comportment to you, and, as such, you will in an important sense not really be making contact with them.

The attitude of liking one's interlocutor (or its expression) is an essential element in the relation of connection with them. The state of liking someone is therefore a state of 'potential-connection': it is a disposition to seek out and enjoy another's company, in such a way that will afford episodes for interpersonal connection with them. Likewise, the relation of connection two people stand in is experienced by each as the manifestation of their respective states of liking one another. Because of this, being liked by someone cannot be regarded as a 'mere means' to connecting with them without distortion, nor can the relation of connection be regarded as a mere 'further effect' of one's being liked by them.

If this is along the right lines then our commitment to living a life in community with others precludes us from being able to intentionally cultivate a state of indifference to whether or not we are liked by others.

What should the naturalist say about those who appear to be engaged in the project of intentionally cultivating an attitude of Indifference to social esteem? The Naturalist has several options, depending on the details of the particular case.

For example, they might suggest that the person in question is an exception to the generic claim that human beings have a natural commitment to a life lived in community with others and, as such, that they lack this characteristically human incapacity. In doing so, they need not endorse the further claim that such individuals are, in some way, defective as human beings. Alternatively, they might suggest that the person in question is either insincere or self-deceived. Diogenes Laërtius, for example, seems to be inviting us to take

this attitude towards Diogenes of Sinope's ostentatious performances of Indifference.[22]

Finally, it might be suggested that they are engaged in a task which merely resembles, and which therefore can be easily confused with, the task of intentionally cultivating an attitude of Indifference to whether they are liked. For example, they might be engaged in the task of intentionally moderating their desire to be liked: seeking, that is, to care less, or less intensely, about being liked than they currently do, without seeking to extirpate the desire to be liked altogether.

4.4 The Desire for Admiration

Note, though, that this does not entail that we cannot intentionally cultivate an attitude of indifference to whether or not we are admired by others. Indeed, it might be suggested that there is both a Truth in Naturalism — that we cannot be indifferent to whether we are liked by others — and also a Truth in Indifference — that we can (and perhaps should) cultivate an attitude of indifference to whether we are admired by others. As I indicated in §2.2, this might be the most straightforward way of interpreting Montaigne.

This being said, I am inclined to think that there is something the Naturalist can say against the claim that we can intentionally cultivate an attitude of indifference to admiration. This argument proceeds on the basis of two thoughts. First, the thought that human beings have a natural commitment not merely to living a life in community with others, but also to living a life among friends. And, second, the thought that there is a conceptual connection between friendship and mutual admiration.

It is plausible that our ground project of living a life in community with others is constituted, in part, by a project of living among friends. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that 'without friends no one would

[22] Compare Lovejoy 1961: 101–2.

choose to live, though he had all the other goods' (1984: 1155a 5–10).[23] Although we might wonder whether the claim that no one would desire such a solitary life is true, it is certainly plausible that it is characteristic of human beings to seek a life among friends, and that living a life with friends is a condition on our capacity to find meaning in our lives and a reason to go on.

The idea that there is a conceptual connection between friendship and mutual admiration is suggested by Antoine Doinel, the protagonist of François Truffaut's film *Stolen Kisses*. 'Love and friendship go hand in hand with admiration', Antoine says to his then girlfriend and future ex-wife, Christine (he goes on to say: 'and I don't admire you!'). Aristotle, I think, would have endorsed Antoine's view, if not his conduct, and in this he would be followed by the many philosophers who have been influenced by the Aristotelian conception of character-friendship.[24]

Antoine's thought is attractive but it is not entirely clear how it should be understood. It might be suggested, for example, that two people are character-friends only if each appreciates and values some positive feature of the other's character — a virtue. Only then, the thought goes, do we value the person themselves rather than valuing them as a means to pleasure or utility (Nehamas 2016: 28, 128–31).

This line of thought, however, is a little too quick. Although it can appear plausible when we do not distinguish admiration from other forms of esteem, when we do we might reasonably wonder why admiration is the only way of valuing a person's character suitable to character friendship. Admiration may be the appropriate evaluative response to virtue, when virtues are considered, as they are by Aristotle, as rare states of excellence that most of us only approximate. But why should we suppose that the only ground on which to value someone's character is virtue in this sense? Why isn't run of the mill likeability enough?

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[23] This thought is echoed by Cicero (1923: 195), Hume, (1740: 2.2.5.15) and many others.

[24] See Aristotle 1984: *Nicomachean* Ethics, Book VIII and *Eudemian Ethics*, Book VII, as well as Cicero 1923, Whiting 1991, Scruton 2006: 222–28, Stroud 2006, and Nehamas 2016.

In fact, my own view is that run of the mill likeability *is* indeed enough: mutual admiration is not *necessary* for character friendship. But perhaps the conceptual connection between friendship and mutual admiration can be understood differently. Perhaps, for example, it can be understood in terms of the idea that it is the aspiration to a state of mutual admiration which is necessary for character-friendship.

In defence of this idea one might claim that we want our friends not merely to value us, but to value us in a way that corresponds to the way we value ourselves. And, it might be added, the kind of self-worth to which we aspire is not one which is derived from our run of the mill positive traits, but from those traits, achievements or abilities which are grounded in our agency and which set us apart from the crowd. Those traits, that is, which are exceptional, remarkable, and admirable, and which would make us feel a fitting form of pride in ourselves.

Such traits might include forms of excellence in specific domains, or the more general form of excellence which consists in the integration of diverse projects into a rounded life that is distinctively one's own. Such traits need not be recognisable as exceptional or remarkable by any point of view, and therefore need not be recognisable as such from the point of view of general public standards. They may be highly idiosyncratic, bound tightly with one's unique response to one's unique struggle, and as such they might only be recognised as traits meriting admiration from an outlook that is congenial to that of the admired person.[25]

Nagel (1976: 14) says that pride and admiration are 'internal and external sides of the same phenomenon.' By this he means, I take it, that that which merits pride in oneself will merit admiration in another. But if the kind of self-worth to which we aspire is one which is marked by a kind of pride in oneself, and if we want our friends to value us in a way that corresponds with the way

[25] For an emphasis on the significance of the idiosyncratic in ethical life, see Murdoch 1971.

we value ourselves, then it is plausible that we will want our friends to admire us or, at the very least, to aspire to admire us.[26]

This suggests that there is something to be said in defence of the thought that our natural commitment to a life lived in community with others precludes indifference to whether we are admired by some, namely our friends. More specifically, it suggests that we must desire a state of affairs in which we are admired by our friends, and not merely on instrumental grounds, but insofar as the kind of friendship we want is one which essentially involves a kind of mutual-admiration. Indeed, it is this specific form of mutual admiration which seems to pervade the friendship of Montaigne and La Boétie as it is described by Montaigne himself in his essay 'On Affectionate Relationships'.

4.5 The Desire for Good Reputation

If we are committed to living a life in community with others in such a way that this precludes the intentional cultivation of indifference to whether we are liked or admired by others, then there will also be grounds for thinking that we cannot cultivate an attitude of indifference to matters of reputation.

When someone has a good reputation in a group, fellow group-members are generally disposed to think and speak well of them, and to dismiss others who think poorly of them. As such, the person in question is more liable to come to be esteemed and less likely to come to be disesteemed by group members on the basis of hearsay and general knowledge.

But if, as I have argued, we cannot intentionally cultivate an attitude of indifference to whether or not we are liked and admired by others, then we also will not be able to intentionally cultivate an attitude of indifference to whether we occupy a social world in which opportunities for connection and friendship

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[26] Similarly Keller (2000: 166) writes: 'the properties for which we are loved should be of such a nature as to give us a reason to feel good about ourselves, to think that we are attractive, admirable, valuable people'.

are available to us. And because of this, we cannot intentionally cultivate an attitude of indifference to whether we have a good reputation.

4.6 Some Advantages

According to the version of Naturalism developed in this section, human beings have evolved a natural commitment to a life lived in community with others, and this precludes the intentional cultivation of three salient versions of Indifference.

This version of Naturalism is able to make a strong case for The Incapacity Thesis and does so without incurring a commitment to the claim that it is outright impossible for human beings to cultivate Indifference. Instead, it incurs a commitment to the comparatively minimal claim that it is the intentional cultivation of Indifference that is impossible for us. This is compatible with neutrality on the outright impossibility of Indifference since it allows that it may be possible for some human beings to fail to develop this natural commitment, and also that they might come to lose this commitment, through some mind-altering transformation.[27]

This version of Naturalism is also able to provide a vindication of The Reflective Endorsement Thesis. As Williams (1993a: 93) emphasises, the fact that we are identified with our fundamental normative commitments means that we are also identified with the normative incapacities which they ground. This explains why we could not coherently *want* to be Indifferent. Just as Luther would not want to become the kind of person who could renounce the word of god, so we would not want to become the kind of creatures that could intentionally cultivate Indifference. To undergo such a change, after all, would be to suffer an erosion in our commitment to a life lived in community with others.

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[27] Unlike the version of Naturalism considered in §3, this version also entails that it is not possible for us to intentionally cultivate a state in which we are able to resist the influence our desire for esteem generally has on our thought and action. See footnote 13.

5. Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to provide an elaboration and defence of Naturalism, the idea that Indifference to social esteem is not a genuine option for social creatures like us and therefore that we cannot seriously regard it as being an attractive ideal for human beings.

I have outlined a version of Naturalism which emphasises the idea that human beings have a natural commitment to a life lived in community with others. Although this version of Naturalism raises questions and objections of its own, my hope is that these questions and objections are less devastating, and more philosophically interesting, than those which face the simple but extreme version of Naturalism considered in §3, and that it would therefore be worthwhile to subject Naturalism, as I have elaborated it, to collective philosophical scrutiny.

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